



Remote Participation Study Committee
Draft Meeting Minutes

Date: November 30, 2021

Time: 7:30pm

Location: Conducted by remote participation

Minutes

Committee Participants:

Mustafa Varoglu, Chair

Jennifer Susse, Co-Chair

Stacie Nicole Smith, Secretary

Alexander Bagnall

Janice Cagan-Teuber

Jim Feeney

Eric Helmuth

Bill Hayner

Rachel Zsembery

Liaison from Finance Committee: Annie LaCourt

Agenda:

1. Review and accept meeting minutes from Nov 10, 2021 meeting
2. Public Comment – 15 minutes
3. Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Update - 10 minutes
4. Town Boards and Commissions Survey Results – 10 minutes
5. Review of team written notes and next steps for Select Board topics – 60+ minutes
6. Any other business – 10 minutes

Decisions Reached and Action Items:

- Minutes were approved.
- Mustafa to make sure meeting minutes and Town and Board Survey Report are posted on the Committee's website

- **Stacie to assign summary sections to her, Eric, and Jennifer. Mustafa can help pull it together.**
- **Mustafa to consolidate the pieces from today's discussion and send around to the committee. Committee members to send any comments back by Sunday Dec 5. Mustafa, Alex, and Jen will then draft the Select Board report based on that input, and send to committee to discuss at our next meeting on Dec 14.**

Summary of Discussions:

Public Comment: There were no public comments.

Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Update

Eric reported on key findings in the responses to the public survey so far:

- 343 responses – the survey closes at the end of the week and we'll see more of a breakdown of data
- A little over half said they typically preferred remote, most others said "it depends," under 10% said they typically prefer in person.
- The committees that ranked highest in priority for providing remote public access for observation and participation were the School Committee and Select Board, followed by the Redevelopment Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Council on Aging, Disability Commission, Finance Committee, and Board of Health. The Zoning Board of Appeals results were probably skewed by the intense interest in the Mugar property. The Human Rights Commission also stood out.
- We have to remember that these are not necessarily a representative sample, but it's a starting point.
- On the questions of how long to keep meeting recordings, about half said from several months to a year, only 22% said longer than a year. The rest were shorter.
- There are many comments in the open-ended questions, will take more time to synthesize.

Members of the Committee made the following comments:

- This is a reminder that any committee can inspire high participation when hot issues come up, so even if there is normally low interest, having the options for remote observation available can be helpful.
- We need to be prepared for Zoom bombing, so need staff to prevent it.

The group agreed that they would prepare a high level analysis of input from this survey to be added to our Report. Stacie agreed to assign summarizing tasks to Eric, Jen, and herself, and Mustafa agreed to pull it together.

Town Boards and Commissions Survey Results

Jen sent around a document summarizing the input from the Town Boards and Committees Survey. The group thanked her for a great job. There were no comments on the report, so Jennifer will finalize and Eric will get it posted on the committee website.

Review of team written notes and next steps for Select Board topics

The committee turned to reviewing the work on the key charges. They discussed how to work on it together to use time well and maintain OML requirements, and agreed that after discussing tonight, each could send individual comments which could be consolidated into one document for discussion at the next meeting.

Attached as Appendix 1 is the consolidated document with each of the sections of the report, corresponding to the Committee's charges, including the changes/comments made by committee members. Below is a summary of additional comments made during the discussion

A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings

Comments:

- Too many bullets. Maybe focus only on hybrid, or just a bit on in person and remote. Don't want eight sections that look like this. 3-5 bullet points? Synthesizing these. Or, these are appendixes – a pro/con table?
- Noting the challenge of remote access being cut off during a meeting and how we might recommend that they proceed.
 - Or we just tease apart the different options and parse pros and cons? Help lay out the issue and problems that need to be solved.
 - We can recommend that each board and committee have a policy ahead of time that is upfront, and clear and document that policy in the agenda/meeting notice. (Like requests for interpretation)
 - We might differentiate between meetings that are based on public participation and those that aren't. Add suggestions to the use cases – some draft language for the policies.
- We could include a recommendation that the Town should endorse Hybrid meetings for the following reasons. Be more specific.
- Might be suggestions for 100% remote, but only if governor changes the Open Meeting Law. We can make a recommendation that isn't currently possible, but if legislation changes, we recommend this. Ex: lots prefer the option of fully remote meetings. Currently won't be legal

- Do we want to recommend that if, seeking public input, seek it in multi-modal fashion? Even if there is remote participation, don't assume that will balance the demographics of who attends. Could also ask for written comment, and other types of outreach.
- Be clear about language - "Participate" assumes input, be clear that this does not change the rules for participation within committees.
 -

B. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation

- Select board can authorize a policy for all the meetings under its authority, authorizing remote access to hybrid meetings, and that each committee and board can then decide how they can have public access. I don't believe, and this would be a question for Doug, that a public body can say only people physically present can ask questions and people remotely present can or can't ask questions, but we should check that they do or don't have that power.
- Prioritization from the surveys and the use cases will go here – highest profile on town website.
- Operational decisions about resources need to be allowed to be made more flexibly. May have to tease out the decision making – where discretion and where determined.

C. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation

- (Law gives SC its own authority)
- Need to make sure it is consistent with ADA
- Recommendation: if hybrid, treat those remotely the same way you treat those in person, and the ability to attend remotely doesn't mean you can participate, and alternate methods for those who can't participate remotely or in person.
- Be careful about setting the bar too high to guarantee that everyone attending remotely has equal access to all components of the meeting. More general – if you can comment in person, you can comment remotely, to the extent possible
- Let people know if there are materials that will be presented at the meeting that will not be available remotely.

D. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation;

- This should be handled by a code of conduct, intent of town, civility,
- Not asking for a by-law, don't see a point.
- Best practices

E. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation

- Could we save travel time of consultants? Probably not significantly
- Looked at different types of rooms, materials and what they cost – (see draft report in appendix)

- Start taking the highest priority meetings, the number of available rooms and start mapping these things. Use Cases - mapping these to the resources so we could get a sense of what we could start with and maybe the startup costs. What meetings would work in which rooms, with which technology. Dropping committee into those buckets.
- For the report: what spaces are likely to be available by April/May based on existing funds and budgets, how many meetings could these fit, and if we want more, we need more technology, trip out more spaces, etc.?
- I think it's feasible to say what spaces are already prepared to accommodate, which ones are in progress, in which ones might be a light lift (ex: a cart for the Lyons hearing room, for \$7000.) What we could roll with immediately - determine how many meetings and timing, what requires staffing, etc.
- Training will be required!
- Is the town supplying the computers? Are they supplying the credentialing to log on?
 - Town would supply the computers in the room and basic credentials. Identify this as a question.
 - Has to track who has keys to the rooms
- Staffing – one of the hardest things to grapple with. If it is offered, then it will never go away. Bargaining to change someone's schedule or hiring someone new – 6-8pm.
 - Select Board room would need staffing. Make available to more committees but would need staffing. (SC room, in new building, will be a multi-function room? Need to check)
 - Could SB or SC room be used without ACMI present? Not now, would need to be switched, which would cost 5-6 figures. Currently can't be run without a tech person.
 - If we inventory our spaces, and we prioritize our groups and we provide a model for what progressive scaling up and roll out could look like in the future. Maybe those would be opportunities or conversely, maybe we'll have enough other spaces that are wired up, you know we I think we just need to have a clear view of what of what the available spaces will be and what the level of need will be.
- Match committees, rooms, and technology to each other.
- What is the glide path for building out some more rooms – two more rooms?
- We probably have ARPA funds, think about what we need to build out, the factor will be staffing and support.

F. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns.

- Didn't work on this one yet.

G. Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work

- one of my recommendations is that the Town needs to do some general instructions for committees, they need to do better sort of training. Better help and support to public bodies. EX: What needs to be in minutes, where to put the minutes,
- Training for each committee or train the trainer.

The group adjourned at 9:45

Appendix 1: Consolidated Draft Document Under Discussion

A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings; (SS, AB)

Fully In Person Meetings

Benefits

- Stronger interpersonal interactions
- Low support costs
- Higher barriers to uncivil behavior
- Comfortable and familiar for some residents
- Can more easily meet and connect with people you share an opinion with
- Straightforward facilitation/meeting management

Challenges

- Physical accessibility
- General accessibility - captioning, physical
- Travel time locally
- Reduced committee participation because of out-of-town travel
- Limited spaces available
- Limited recording capability

Fully Remote Meetings

Benefits

- Ease of presentations
- Accessibility
 - Cloud-service closed-captioning possible
 - Physically accessible
 - COVID-safe
- Reduced travel time
- Reduced childcare needs
- Potentially increased participation
- Members/public can attend even when out of town
- Flexibility
- Ease of recording/broadcast
- Practically unlimited meeting space
- Cost savings when paid consultants are required to attend
 - Most obviously, savings to the town - perhaps just to PTBC? Perhaps \$300/meeting, when an hourly consultant needs to travel to a meeting and can bill the town for that time

- Savings to petitioners to town boards like the ZBA

Challenges

- Operational cost of technology
- Differential comfort and skill with technology use
- Dependent on internet access and third-party services
 - Lack of internet access or internet device
 - Service interruptions can cut off remote participants
- Lower barriers for uncivil behavior
- Potential for malicious disturbances
- Does not, on its own, reduce existing participatory inequalities
(Einstein/Glick/Puig/Palmer)
- Susceptible to user error in scheduling and starting meetings including possibility of temporary disruption to running meeting
- Zoom configuration issues
- Zoom interface changes without notice

Hybrid

Benefits

- Many of the benefits of both in person and virtual, listed above

Challenges

- Many of the challenges of both in person and virtual, listed above
- Each board and committee will need to develop its own policies around remote participation and technology failure contingencies
- Shifting State requirements
- Equalizing the experiences for remote and in-room participants
- Capital costs of technology
- Operational cost of technology
- Limited physical space available
 - Suitable rooms will probably be more limited than the existing meeting rooms for full in person due to technology needs
- Managing remote users/presentations
 - This is a challenge for someone who might also be trying to run the meeting and/or take minutes
 - Will probably require a meeting member to deliberately dedicate effort to ensure that both remote and in person people are equitably represented
- Under current law, a quorum of the voting members is required physically. If a hybrid meeting was convened in this manner, and the remote participation technology or service failed, the meeting could still go forward, legally. This might have the potential to disadvantage those who can only participate remotely.

- Are boards and committees free to make different participation rules for in-person and remote participants?

B. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation; (BH, AL)

Do we need or want to Select Board to endorse remote access to meetings with local quorums? This would enable hybrid meetings.

- **Verify with Town Counsel:** Based on interpretation of Open Meeting law – Select Board can authorize remote access to in-person meetings. Meeting members (organizers) can authorize public participation in the format they want for their meeting.
- Would this cover School Committee? If other organizations or meetings don't follow open meeting law (Town Meeting, ABAC, EALS, etc.) I don't think they would be covered by this
- Even if this is authorized implementing this is a hurdle due to space, equipment and technology skills available in town and on committees?

Which public bodies or meetings should be the pilot remote participation in their meetings?

- Propose starting with a subset in rough order below based on – can be discussed/ refine, I based this off of the spreadsheet Alex has started categorizing the meetings aiming to identify meetings with greater public participation.
 - Select Board and School Committee.
 - ARB, ZBA
 - In no particular order: (Disability Commission Park and Rec Commission, Historical Commission, Envision Arlington, Conservation Commission, Board of Health)

C. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation; (BH, MV)

In general, public participation (whether in person or full remote) is composed of:

- a) Public observation of the ongoing business of the committee or board during the meeting
- b) Formal input periods in the meeting (generally specified in the agenda)
- c) Informal input/ or discussion between the audience and the meeting members

Propose that hybrid meetings to the extent feasible mirror the in-person or full remote experience for meeting attendees wherever they are participating from. Meeting organizers should use the available technology and meeting resources to:

- As a minimum standard, provide all participants (remote or in person) access to video and audio of entire meeting
 - a. Note for RPSC discussion – specifying suggestions such as a big screen in the meeting location to show zoom participants, cameras on local organizers and audience is probably beyond the details of this specific charge.

- If the meeting has public input periods but the technology is not available for remote input, the meeting organizers should make reasonable efforts to broadcast the meeting via Zoom.
 - a. That the remote audience will not be able to speak during the meeting should be explicitly stated on the agenda.
 - b. One alternative is to allow the remote audience to use video conferencing chat options to submit questions or comments. This would require a meeting member to read or reply to comments/ questions.
- When the meeting organizer has the technology resources to let remote participants provide formal or informal public comments the organizer should:
 - a. Give remote and local participants equal access to provide input to the meeting
 - b. Share the remote audio (or visual materials) with the in-person meeting board or commission members and in-person public audience.

D. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation; (MV) code of conduct, intent of town, civility, Blue are Mustafa comments/ questions

- Currently not proposing we submit a bylaw requiring remote access to meetings.
- Propose the Town monitor initial, pilot, hybrid meeting's performance both in rooms with full infrastructure as well as a few smaller meeting rooms with more ad hoc equipment such as laptops and Owl teleconferencing systems.
 - Would the Select Board and School Committee meetings rooms be possible to use if ACMI staff is not present?
- If hybrid meetings are shown to be working (or iteratively become functional over time) the Town can consider mandating a working solution to other meetings beyond the pilot set.

Propose the list below as Best Practices (or other similar Goal Statement) guiding principles for providing remote access to local meetings so that successful hybrid meetings can be held. Ask the appropriate body or bodies to Endorse the following (see questions regarding who does the endorsement):

1. Best Practices for hybrid meetings (After the emergency authorization expires in April)
 - To the extent possible a remote option should be present for all meetings that are held in person - realistically we will start with a shorter list of highest profile boards and commissions based on the highlighted meetings on the Town website.
 - The ideal remote set up will result in people present locally and remotely being able to see and hear each other throughout the meeting
 - The Chair of the meeting should strongly consider (be encouraged) delegating a person to manage the remote communications
 - This person will allow remote participants to enter the meeting, note when people have their hand up to speak, monitor to prevent Zoom bombing, communicate any questions that may come up in the chat.

- At minimum, meeting organizers should provide an audio and video feed of board members discussions and any questions from the audience (may need to be repeated by meeting organizers)
 - The meeting organizer should specify the opportunities (or lack of) for remote input during the meeting as part of the agenda announcement.
 - This will let the public know if they want to have their voices heard they will need to go to the meeting in person or submit comments ahead of time.
 - When the minutes of the meeting are completed names of local and remote speakers, comments ([and chats?](#)) should be captured.
- 2. The RPSC and Town should commit to monitor performance of the hybrid meetings to learn from successes and problems to improve the process.
- 3. There should be a consolidated list of hybrid-meeting enabled rooms on the Town Website to allow meeting organizers find these rooms easily for their meetings.
- 4. The Town and School Committee should formally make their hybrid meeting capable rooms, including the Select Board and School Committee rooms, plus any other dedicated use room, available for booking to the public on the consolidated list.
 - Propose the Select Board and School Committee have the priority to reclaim a booked room with some defined amount of notice.
- 5. The Town and Schools should provide basic instructions to meeting organizers on how to set up the technology in the rooms and access to videoconferencing accounts (i.e. Zoom). The RPSC and Town (JF) can help draft cheat sheets, slides. RPSC can do this after Jan or April 2022. Perhaps suggest Town maintain these instructions.
- 6. Sample policies to be adopted by Board and Comm. In case technology fails during a meetings.
- 7. The Town should work with ACMI and other volunteer groups to determine if there is a way to provide technical support, especially between 6 and 8 pm when meetings are starting.
- 8. When videoconferencing is used the meeting organizer should have speech transcription and recording enabled.
 - This will help provide a record of the meeting for those unable to participate or hear the meeting. ([We have the technology, we might as well use it](#))
 - Based on public survey input and storage space and costs the RPSC can discuss how long to store meeting video
- 9. The should Town track the savings from consultant not charging travelling time to and from in person meetings. This can help defray costs of setting up rooms for hybrid meetings.
- 10. [Maintaining civility – this seems to be a larger issue than hybrid. Simple traffic](#) management to prevent people interrupting each other from different spaces can rest with the meeting organizers/ members. However seeing meeting members interrupt or disrupt public participants I don't think this will be a challenge to specify.

E. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation;

Type of Room

Type A

Top-tier
Two displays
Multiple cameras
Presentation video input
Individual microphones for board/committee members
One microphone for public participation (could be improved?)
Staffing required - could be mitigated with more up-front technology expenditures
Computer for Zoom control
Example: Select Board, School Committee, hi-attendance ARB and ZBA

Type B

Two displays
One or two cameras
Presentation video input
Microphone array for board/committee
One or two microphones for public participations
Computer for Zoom control
Example: ARB, ZBA

Type C

One display
USB camera/microphone array on table
Computer for Zoom control
Example:

Type D

No displays
USB camera/microphone array on table
Computer for Zoom control
Example: ACAC

Capital cost

DTEN D7 - all in one Zoom appliance



55" single display - \$4,500

75" Dual Display - \$17,000

Meeting Owl - \$999



Recurring monthly charges

Zoom Room

\$50/month for service

Zoom Webinar

\$80/month for service (500 attendees)

Zoom Meeting

\$15/month (100 participants, no recording transcripts)
\$20/month (300 participants, recording transcripts)

Third-party support

Zoom has a “hardware as a service” product. Pricing is only on application and custom for each application.

Staffing

- Existing meeting support staff (already assigned to that meeting) - no additional cost
- New support staff (if needed for IT security or other policy reasons) - additional cost
- IT support staff on call for technical troubleshooting (needed?) - additional cost that might never go away

Note that new town staff time may involve overtime depending on the personnel